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ABSTRACT

Part of a series designed to provide practical ideas parents can use to help children become readers, this booklet focuses on how to encourage young children to write. The booklet describes the kinds of writing that children do, offers suggestions on how to encourage children to experiment with spelling, and urges parents not to be overly concerned with the correctness of their young child's writing. The booklet provides specific activities for parents, such as (1) practicing writing; (2) providing the child with easy access to writing materials; (3) celebrating children's authorship; (4) valuing their writing; (5) reading to the child; (6) encouraging a child's storytelling; and (7) encouraging children's teachers to incorporate writing as part of the daily curriculum. A list of 11 recommended books and articles and a list of resources available from the International Reading Association are appended. (RS)

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You Can Help Your Young Child with Writing

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You Can Help Your Young Child with Writing

Four year old Sam proudly brings a folded piece of paper to his parents and announces, "I wrote this for you." They smile indulgently at him and accept the note. Sam demands, "Read it to me! Read it to me!" His parents unfold the paper and look at the unfamiliar symbol, .

They turn to Sam and say, "This is special writing that you did for us. You wrote the note. Please read it to us."

Sam beams and begins, "You know that movie you took me to see. The other kids have seen it, too. We all love it. You know the movie I mean, *E.T.* I want to remember the name."

At this young age, Sam demonstrates that he knows the usefulness of writing. He wants to remember something important to him, and he has learned that notes help him remember. He also shows that writing expresses what he experiences and what he says.

Sam learned to talk by trying often and not always being perfect; now he is learning to write by trying often and not always being perfect. The direction and order of his letters, and even the neatness of his note, don't matter to him. What counts for Sam is his message. His parents respond to his writing in a manner that supports his positive feelings about himself and his wanting to write. Therefore, Sam will continue to write, thus getting better at writing.

Kinds of Writing that Children Do

Psychologist Psyche Cattell says that children living in a society that uses writing may scribble spontaneously at eighteen months of age, or even earlier if someone shows them how to hold a pencil, pen, marker, or crayon. Children's first scribbles may fill an entire page, often leaving no margins. With time and practice, their scrib-

bles become focused so that a border seems to frame the page. In English speaking families, children may make wavy lines from right to left or left to right. They go through lots of paper and often do not appear to be very interested in their drawings and writings once they finish.

But children's beginning to write really depends on their interest in writing. If they see their parents, siblings, and people in restaurants, post offices, and libraries writing, they, too, will want to try to put marks on paper. In fact, they will probably write on walls, on sneakers, and in books. Parents usually have to insist on appropriate places for writing in order to save clothes and walls. Often, children collect subscription cards from magazines, forms from banks, and order blanks from stores on which to practice filling in spaces as they continue to discover where print goes.

Children may ask parents to write the names of people in their lives or names of favorite toys. This experi-

Children learn to write by writing, and parents can help by giving encouragement and support.

ence gives children the opportunity to see words that matter to them. One important question children ask is "How do you write my name?"

Many children learn the entire alphabet from the letters in their names. For example, children with the letter *T* in their names can easily add another bar and have an *F* or two bars and have an *E*. They also could turn the *T* to make an *X*. By dropping the right lower bar on the *X*, they have a *Y*; by dropping both lower bars, they have a *V*. Once children become interested in letters, they may copy any print they see—sometimes a whole page from a book.

When children want to write on their own, they may draw a picture and label it. They may write one letter and say it's a word, or they may string together several letters and even numbers. For example, "btpltt2" may mean "got married." Generally, adults see no connection between these letter strings and what children say they mean. The children themselves may forget what they mean after a while. It is important, however, to honor their learning activities and to trust in the fact that the children meant something when they wrote the word or words. How adults respond to children's attempts to write has a strong influence on whether the children continue to write.

Children see parents going through the kitchen asking, "What do we need from the grocery store?" and making a list. They see people talking on the phone and writing messages. In restaurants, they see adults give orders for food and see waiters and waitresses write down the orders. At this point, children guess that writing is connected to talking. Their early spellings reflect how they hear and say words. For example, "I rod a pone and had a pnak" means "I rode a pony and had a picnic."

When we speak, we often link words together. Because the pauses in speech are not at the end of every word, children will chunk words in their writings. For instance, "mibrothranmisistr" is "my brother and my sister," since that's how children hear the phrase.

Children's understanding of the written system is usually more flexible than an adult's understanding. Children may write and run out of space on a line. They simply finish the last word or words by writing above or below the line on which they've been writing; for example, DAN (Danny).
YN

Writing words with the letters in different order doesn't seem to bother children. They can read "em" as "me" and "ti" as "it" without hesitation. This does *not* indicate a reversal problem or an early sign of a learning disability.

How Do You Spell . . . ?

Children may ask you how to spell a certain word. You may tell them the spelling, but you need to encourage them to try to spell the word themselves. Suggest that they spell it as best they can. If they insist on your help, say the word and ask them which sound they hear at the beginning. Say the word again, slowly, stretching it out, and ask them what other sounds they hear. Accept the spelling with which they are satisfied. Remind them that they may say words and try to spell on their own. If they write a message for you that you can't read, and they ask you to read it, remember Sam's parents.

A message from Emily to her mother: "I love you."

If parents write, children are likely to become writers, too.

What about Correctness?

Many teachers encourage children's experimentations in writing by telling them to write the best they can, and not to worry about perfect handwriting or spelling. If children come to a word they cannot spell, they say it slowly and write the sounds they hear. Children first need to get their ideas on paper and feel what authorship is like. Immediate correction of spelling or grammar is discouraging, even for adults.

For example, a grandmother received a thank you note from her grandchild, circled all the misspelled words in red, and sent it back. Then she wondered why her grandchild never wrote her again. The grandmother's technique only shows her grandchild that grandma can spell. The grandchild knows this; after all, grandma is an adult. The trick is to get the grandchild to spell. The opportunity to experiment with spelling promotes a lasting understanding of its rules. This freedom also gives children confidence to write their own stories.

As children grow more proficient at writing and read their stories to classmates and teachers, they learn to edit their writing based on their audiences' responses. They become better readers through their own writing. By editing their classmates' writings, and by reading literature, dictionaries, and texts, they become more accurate.

Writing ability develops over time. Although there appears to be a progression from scribbling to easily comprehended writing, there are no set ages at which we may see these demonstrations of writing. Your child may scribble at four years of age or at two, or use invented spellings at five years of age or at eight.

In fact, children may produce all these examples at one age, depending on the kinds of writing they are doing. For instance, they might label drawings with strings of numbers and letters, sign their names on birthday cards, and use wavy lines to write stories. As adults, we need to value whatever we see and provide materials and opportunities for more experimentation.

Activities for Parents

- **Be a writer yourself.** Provide examples of writing and spelling, while demonstrating uses of writing. Show your children how to make cards; order from catalogs; play restaurant, grocery store, library, and school; list favorite TV shows; plan a TV schedule; design menus; create maps; leave notes; and sign their names to birthday, holiday, and thank you cards.

- **Provide your child with easy access to writing and drawing materials.** Colored paper, stationery, different sizes and kinds of other paper, and some paper stapled into booklets should be left on a low shelf or in a special drawer. Inexpensive markers, pens, pencils, watercolors, chalk, and a small chalkboard may be kept in a basket or tray near the paper. An old working typewriter is a wonderful addition to a writing center. Remember that writing may be done with a stick in the sand; a finger in the air; in shaving cream on a cookie sheet; or with beans, blocks, or miniature marshmallows.

- **Celebrate your children's authorship.** Ask your children to read what they have written. Talk about the scribbles, drawings, letters, and signs you see. Ask open-ended questions that encourage conversation about the drawings and stories. Respond to the meaning of the message in a positive way. Be a good audience.

- **Value your children's writing.** Display artwork and writing in the kitchen and bedroom. Sit with your children and place attractive or favorite samples in a scrapbook. Frame special watercolors or their first attempt at writing their names.

► **Read to your children for at least fifteen minutes a day.** Books clearly show that stories have a beginning, middle, and end. This model, as well as the standard spelling found in books, provides your children with knowledge on which to draw for writing. Let your children select books to be read, and try to establish a pattern of reading at the same time every day. Many parents find just before bedtime a comforting time to be together. Cuddle up to your children, hug them, and maybe hold them on your lap. However, if you are tired or rushed, it is better to skip a night in order to keep the reading experience pleasant.

► **Encourage the concept of story by telling traditional stories, or stories from daily life, or retelling books.** Listen to your children tell made up stories or stories from personal experiences. Have them dictate stories to you and make the stories into books, using sheets of construction paper stapled together or index cards fastened with yarn. Your children can provide the illustrations. Books entitled *Things I Like*, *Things I Don't Like*, *A Book about* Me, and *The Day I Went to the Farm* are enjoyable to make. Children may combine drawing with cutting pictures from old magazines while you supply the words.

► **Encourage teachers to include writing as part of their daily curriculum.** Writing supports reading, mathematics, and other content areas; it is not an extra subject. Every classroom should have a writing center.

Recommended Reading for Parents

Books

The Art of Teaching Writing. Lucy McCormick Calkins. Heinemann Educational Books, 1985.

The Beginnings of Writing. Charles Temple, Ruth Nathan, Nancy Burns, and Frances Temple. Allyn & Bacon, 1988.

Breaking Ground: Teachers Relate Reading and Writing in the Elementary School. Jane Hansen, Thomas Newkirk, and Donald Graves. Heinemann Educational Books, 1985.

What Did I Write? Marie Clay. Heinemann Educational Books, 1975.

Write from the Start: Tapping Your Child's Natural Writing Ability. Donald Graves and Virginia Stuart. New American Library, 1985.

Articles

I Am the One Who Writes: New Approaches to Children's Writing. Lucy McCormick Calkins. *American Educator,* 1985, volume 26, pages 28-29, 42, 44.

Observations of Learning to Read and Write Naturally. Margot Cohn. *Language Arts,* 1981, volume 58, pages 549-555.

Practice Makes Perfect. Claudette Russell. *Family Circle,* August 23, 1983, page 4.

See Jane Read! See Jane Write! Jean Marzollo and Elizabeth Sulzby. *Parents Magazine,* July 1988, pages 80-84.

Teaching Children to Write Well: What You Can Do. Emily Pinkston. *Better Homes and Gardens,* April 1986, page 76.

Why Children Should Draw: The Surprising Link between Art and Learning. Roger M. Williams. *The Saturday Review,* September 3, 1977, pages 11-16.

Resources for Parents from IRA

Books

Comics to Classics: A Parent's Guide to Books for Teens and Preteens. Arthea (Charlie) Reed. No. 798. US$8.95; discount price for IRA members US$7.95.

The Read-Aloud Handbook, revised edition. Jim Trelease. Published by Penguin Books and codistributed by IRA. No. 633. US$8.95; discount price for IRA members US$8.25.

To order, send your check to: International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, Delaware 19714-8139, USA. Please be sure to specify the title and publication number when ordering.

Parent Booklets

Helping Your Child Become a Reader. Nancy Roser. No. 161

How Can I Prepare My Young Child for Reading? Paula Grinnell. No. 881

You Can Encourage Your High School Student to Read. Jamie Myers. No. 162

You Can Help Your Young Child with Writing. Marcia Baghban. No. 160

Single copies of each of these parent booklets are available at a cost of US$1.75 each, prepaid only. Send your check to: Parent Booklets at the address above. Please be sure to specify the title and publication number when ordering.

Parent Brochures

IRA has available ten brochures covering a variety of topics pertaining to ways in which parents can help children of all ages become readers. To receive single copies of all ten brochures, send a self-addressed envelope stamped with first class postage for *three* ounces to: Parent Brochures at the address above. The brochures are available in bulk quantities also, and ordering information appears in each brochure. (Requests from outside the USA should include a self-addressed envelope, but postage is not required.)

Journal of My Child's Writing

This booklet is part of a series designed to provide practical ideas parents can use to help children become readers. Many of the booklets are being copublished by IRA and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading.

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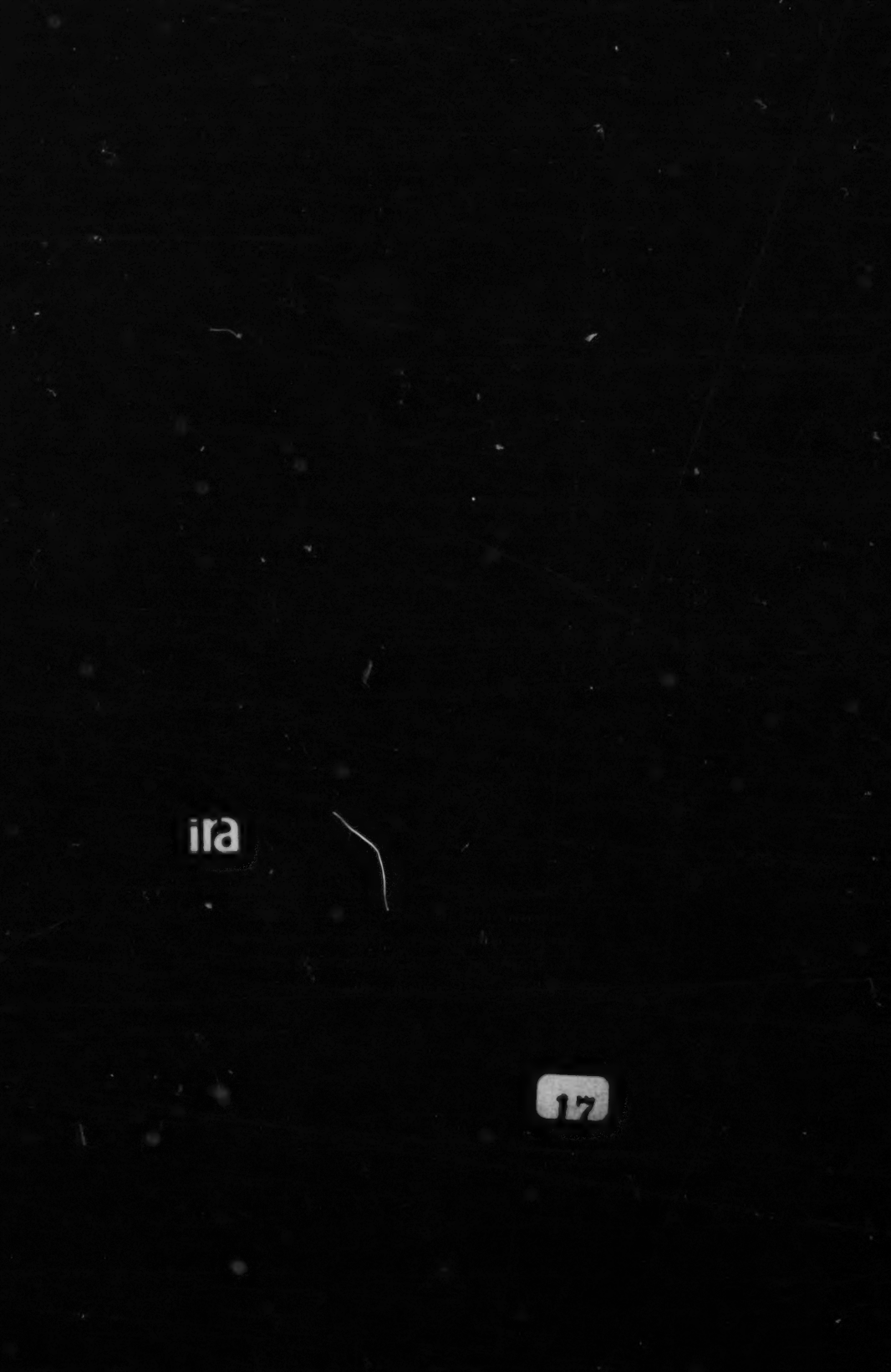
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